

Discovering the Same in the Other: On the Role of Consciousness and Visual Analogy in Verena Vanoli's Multimedia Installation "Can You Hear the Grass Grow?"



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Analogy, born of the human desire to achieve union with that which one does not possess, is also a passionate process marked by fluid oscillations. Perceiving the lack of something—whether physical, emotional, spiritual, or intellectual—inspires us to search for an approximating resemblance to fill its place.¹

Barbara Maria Stafford

Viewers of Verena Vanoli's installation "Can You Hear the Grass Grow?" are faced with a problem. It seems to consist in a challenge to the conscious perception of thoughts that are capable of building bridges. Barbara Maria Stafford calls them 'flashes of bridging processes' and what she means is the conscious perception of mental processes occurring in our consciousness. They are based on the potential to connect things which were previously separated. These are processes that—if we



look at the association between 'art' and things from the realm that one might call 'non-art'—emphasize the *relational* qualities of phenomena which we perceive. Here, something can be *like* something else, and it can also mean being part in something that it is not, whether this is another person, a culture that is unfamiliar to us, a subtle state of consciousness—or one of the boundless possible states of the organic or inorganic universe.²

In "Can You Hear the Grass Grow?" Verena Vanoli allows us to participate in her subjective visualizations of what is thought and felt. She uses an image language here that does not emphasize *differences* but sensitizes us for similarities. A primary characteristic seems to be the artistic endeavor to create an albeit only implied unity

¹ Stafford, B. M. (1999). *Visual Analogy. Consciousness as the Art of Connecting*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press. p. 2.

² *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

with what we are *not* capable of perceiving. It is about facts and phenomena which we can “see” and “feel” on a psychological level. This is a fundamental problem of our perception that, according to Stafford, we often compensate for with an exaggerated use of diversity, of differences we ascribe to the phenomena we observe.³ Barbara Maria Stafford explains this cognitive aspect by describing it as the *experience* of a ‘passionate process marked by fluid oscillations’ between two poles of the perceived reality. In Verena Vanoli’s art these polarities resembling each other are visualized on the one hand as ‘tree trunks’ swathed in the inner tubes of bicycle with moving ‘branches’—and on the other as a photographic image of the silhouettes of bare-branched hornbeams projected onto panels of cloth.⁴ We know this from impressionistic pictures of wintry graveyards or forlorn country roads. From her studio in Immensee, Verena Vanoli can take in panoramas like that all the time. The visual rhetoric in this analogy (which is so obvious to me) is definitely a challenge. It is not necessarily all that easy to understand if we also want to comprehend how these found images shape our minds in the sense of something we call *education*.⁵ What could their mission consist in, as an *educational* way of forming us?



Art makes its statements always within a specific space of perception that it defines itself. With many artists, this space is a result of subjective observation and active contemplation. Creative activity ultimately lets a work of art appear as an open but not unstructured field. Martin Kemp has demonstrated this most comprehensibly in his book *Visualizations*, using some very

descriptive examples.⁶ Vanoli’s artistic space works with radically varying materials and media, and therefore it is to us a space we can *experience*. In the first place, it seems to me that it bets on knowledge of our perception—on our knowing that we can *consciously* perceive. Apart from that, however, the artist also points out the non-

³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁴ Here the artist also experiments with “art” as a medium and its relation to the “real”. A certain topicality lies in the understanding, which is not discussed any further in this connection, that any image taken as a representation of a live natural spectacle is infused with a quality of abstraction, if not of deceit. I took this association verbatim from a text by Sebastian Vincent Grevsmühl who phrased it with regard to the problem of setting observations in a living context while there is no complete discovery framework. See Grevsmühl, S. V. (2007). *Epistemische Topografien. Fotografische und radartechnische Wahrnehmungsräume*. In: *Verwandte Bilder. Die Fragen der Bildwissenschaft* (Reichle, I., Siegel, S., Spelten, A., eds.). Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos. p. 264.

⁵ This fact has also been alluded to by the linguistic indicators of previous reviews of Verena Vanoli’s artwork. What I have in mind, for instance, are interpretations made by Peter Killer. In the objects that Vanoli wraps up in inner tubes (the toys, for example), he sees her articulating our relationship (in the sense of *remembering*) with ‘objects’. While such an approach—which reasons in the context of notions seen as substantial within our Western culture, such as language, identity, spirit and symbol—seems to wield a certain legitimacy for the reception of some of the artist’s earlier works, it is no longer compatible with the philosophical and neurobiological debates on the nature of human consciousness that also take into account cognitive aspects. See Killer, P. (2005). *Erinnerungen sind Teil unserer Identität*. In: *Verena Vanoli. Werkdokumentation. Installation ‘je me souviens’* (Vanoli, V., ed.). Immensee.

⁶ Kemp, M. (2000). *Visualizations. The Nature Book of Art an Science*. Oxford: University Press. p. 6.

conscious areas where we have non-knowledge. The video production entitled “no me gusta o me gusta” shows portraits of people from different countries of the world. They report about personal connections to their daily life contexts and to nature and the environment. On two separate sound tracks, the statements of the interviewees are set into contrast with terms such as *summer rain, rustling wind, heat, coolness or silence*, all of which represent natural phenomena or qualities. But there are also words like *hunger, thirst, satisfaction, cleanliness* or even *softness*, expressing physical needs or personal assessments and criticisms with regard to human desires for harmony and a rapport with culture and the environment. From a perspective involving the sociology of knowledge, this work does not only provide subtle insights into subjective mental states—it also exposes the whole spectrum of feelings and experience that individual people with different ethnic, societal and social origins may have. A lot of what we might like to know more about these people remains unsaid in these film sequences. However, it quickly becomes clear to the viewer of Vanoli’s installation that in a strange way art goes beyond the borders of what we hear and perceive here. The toy house, symbolizing human accommodation, wrapped in black rubber tubes and with the TV screen inside that represents people, this item refers to relational qualities—to the aspects of interdependence between the elements of this installation that we perceive. The material that Verena Vanoli has used time and again for many years now, the butyl rubber of inner tubes for bicycles, which is made up of soot and sulphur, among other things, in my eyes establishes important references by addressing real and imaginary layers in our consciousness and expanding our limits of perception, emotionally as well as intellectually. In this connection I see a reference to what Karl-Josef Pazzini means by *education*. Education, he writes, denotes a relationship and presents a texture, an ethical position that accounts for the unredressability of the deficit and the boundaries to the Other. Education as relation then indeed has, like every relationship, both real and symbolic layers that sometimes are directly accessible to the consciousness, and it



feeds on what Pazzini calls *irritability, attitude* or even *style*.⁷ Verena Vanoli’s artistic and visual style of thinking seems to penetrate far into those parts of our perception where the deep structures of intuition, acquired both through nature and nurture, are “at work”. Here we usually act on the assumption that there is a mutual confirmation of the various objects in the world by our senses, or a projection of

internal patterns onto the external world.⁸ I have a feeling that deep down at heart Verena Vanoli in her work “Can You Hear the Grass Grow?” is occupied with what

⁷ Pazzini, K.-J. (2000). Suche nach Zusammenhalt. In: *Kontaktabzug. Medien im Prozess der Bildung*. Vienna: Turia + Kant. p. 203.

⁸ See von Foerster, H., Pörksen, B. (2007). *Wahrheit ist die Erfindung eines Lügners. Gespräche für Skeptiker*. Heidelberg: Carl-Auer-Systeme Verlag. p. 21. And Bedö, V. (2007). Landkarten als Werkzeuge unseres Denkens. In: *Verwandte Bilder. Die Fragen der Bildwissenschaft* (Reichle, I., Siegel, S., Spelten, A., eds.). Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos. p. 239.

Barbara Maria Stafford calls the self-imposed “limitations of separability”.⁹ I also see Vanoli’s art, which appeals to subjective states of consciousness, people and cultures, as alternative perception—i.e., one that demonstrates to us—of the boundless possible states of an organic and, ultimately, inorganic whole that surrounds us: the universe. Vanoli’s art is also an attempt to come to terms beyond the insurmountable differences and dualisms—with an esthetic model that prefers sharing and analogies instead. As such it is diametrically opposed to the increasingly numerous traps opening up in many social and cultural fields and leading to a monocultural development,¹⁰ examples of which are today’s irreconcilable ethnic and religious disputes.

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Translation: Werner Richter

Illustrations

Fig. 1, p. 1: “Can You Hear the Grass Grow?” 2007, installation with metal structures wrapped in bicycle inner tubes, each approx. 200 cm in height.

Fig. 2, p. 2: Toy house wrapped in bicycle inner tubes, 2005, approx. 140 x 120 x 110 cm, video screen with film “no me gusta o me gusta”, 2007, 20’. Part of installation “Can You Hear the Grass Grow?” 2007.

Fig. 3, p. 3: Video still from the film “no me gusta o me gusta”, 2007 by Verena Vanoli, 20’. Part of installation “Can You Hear the Grass Grow?” 2007.

⁹ Stafford 1998 (see note 1); p. 180.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 180.